

Beyond Shame

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According to the Honour Based Violence Awareness Network (HBVA), there are approximately 5000 honour killings internationally each year, 12 of which occur in the UK. An 'honour' killing is the most extreme form of HBV where the supposed offender against family 'honour' is killed to restore the 'honour' which has supposedly been lost through the 'offenders' behaviour (hmv-awareness.com). Most HBV occur within Indian & Pakistani communities.

From a western mindset, it is difficult to understand how a father and a brother can become so incensed at the apparently 'innocent actions' of a daughter/sister to be motivated to stone her to death as a matter of 'honour'. By definition, honour killings have at their root a deep sense of shame which causes families to 'lose face' in the eyes of their communities and thus requires such brutal redress.

While honour killings lie at the extreme end of shame motivated behaviour, much of what frustrates the experience of healthy relationships has its root in real or perceived shame. Expressions of anger, fear, anxiety and depression more often than not, have their foundation in the experience of shame. In her excellent book, *Daring Greatly*, researcher Brené Brown defines shame as, ". . . the fear of disconnection—it's the fear that something we've done or failed to do, an ideal that we've not lived up to, or a goal that we've not accomplished makes us unworthy of connection (69).

The Bible has taught us from the beginning (see Genesis 2:16), and even modern neuroscientific research has confirmed, that we are hardwired for intimate relationships. Yet our sinful legacy has devastated our capacity to live authentically, free from the shame which keeps us cowering from life under the blanket of the fear of rejection.

Shame appears in mankind's experience as a direct result of The Fall (Genesis 3:10) and has remained an inevitable facet of our experience since. The extent to which shame impacts our relationships is directly correlated to the quality of attachments we form with the significant others in our family of origin.

The term attachment in a relational context refers to the deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another across time and space. It is our emotional connection to significant others that gives meaning and value to our lives. It is in our family of origin that we subtly but surely, develop an internal blueprint for how we do relationships. Unfortunately, as part of the process, we also learn to 'do shame.'

Studies in the field of 'Adult Attachment' suggest that as a result of our early experiences we develop one of four attachment styles which come to the fore most readily in times of stress. The styles are - *secure* (assured in relationship); *anxious* (overly dependent through fears of abandonment); *fearful* (desirous of, but frightened of intimacy) and *avoidant* (overly self-reliant and emotionally distant). According to research in the field, *anxious*, *fearful* and *avoidant*

attachment styles are all shame-based having their foundation in what Brown describes as the 'fear of disconnection' and are based upon faulty core beliefs about the lovability of self.

An important distinction needs to be made between guilt and shame. While on the surface, they may appear to be synonymous terms, there is a profound difference between the two. Guilt is a legitimate emotion of sadness and remorse rooted in our poor choices in thought and/or behaviour. Guilt says, "I DID something wrong." Without it we would feel no remorse when we do wrong things. Shame, on the other hand, is more closely related to core beliefs we hold about ourselves. Shame says, "I AM bad, wicked, worthless, stupid etc." It is an identity which permeates every aspect of our lives and taints our relationships. Guilt is like a shirt that we wear as appropriate in a given situation and is a vital component in the experience of repentance. Shame is like a straightjacket which keeps us bound in a psychological prison with walls of fear, self-criticism, depression and a host of other negative beliefs and emotions.

Shame-based living is countered by learning to live authentically in spite of inherent fears we may have about how we are perceived by others. Because we are 'born in sin and shaped in iniquity' (see Psalm 51:5), we may never be totally free from the temptation to run and hide in the face of shame. However, we can learn to become resilient to the temptation to live our lives based on what other people may think about us. The most courageous thing we can do in life is to face our innermost fears, embrace our vulnerabilities, and make intentional choices to engage on a heart level with 'safe' people who accept us for who we are, while encouraging us to be the best that we can be.

Ultimately, the antidote to shame is the experience of God's unconditional grace. If we allow it, shame can block out the light of God's grace and leave us hiding in the shadow of the fear of self-revelation and emotional exposure. However, when we understand that Jesus' sacrifice for us has made us, "accepted in the Beloved" (Ephesians 1:6 NKJV) and that there is nothing that we can do that will stop God from loving us, we can accept ourselves in spite of our faulty core beliefs and others' opinions of us. At the heart of any secure relationship is trust, emotional availability and sensitive responsiveness. We find all these qualities in the God who loves us with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3); is our 'refuge and fortress' (Psalm 91:2); promises to answer when we call (Jeremiah 33:3); and will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5).

Only when we embrace the security that we find in Him can we exercise the courage to engage with the world around us. We cannot be graceful toward others unless we ourselves have embraced the grace of God. It has been said that 'hurt people, hurt people.' Those who are harsh, judgemental and exacting toward others tend to have an internal taskmaster who is doubly harsh on themselves. We cannot give what we have not first received. As Peter instructs, "As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10). Whatever our legacy of shame may be, we can courageously embrace the legacy of grace the Father has made freely available with the assurance that 'where sin abounds, grace abounds much more (Roman 5:20).